

The Study of *Runqiang* in Chinese Folk Music

ETUDE DU VELOUTEMENT DU TON DANS LA MUSIQUE VOCALE NATIONALE DE CHINE

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Abstract: *Runqiang* has the important functions of beautifying, decorating and refining singing styles. This article analyzes the concept of *Runqiang*, its formation origin and its compositional structures.

Key words: Chinese folk music, *Runqiang*

Résumé: Le veloutement du ton joue le rôle d'embellir, de décorer, d'enjoliver et de représenter le style. Le présent article effectue une analyse du veloutement du ton sur les plans du concept, de l'origine et de la structure.

Mots-Clés: musique vocale nationale de Chine, veloutement du ton

Chinese folk vocal music is rooted in the background of Chinese culture, based on Chinese language and characterized by a unique way of pronunciation and intonation, which emphasizes the correct pronunciation, smooth voice, and the deep emotion behind them, all of which makes Chinese folk music an art of singing which combines voice, emotion, pronunciation, and intonation.² Therefore it is necessary not only to grasp the correct ways of pronunciation, but also to master various ways of *Runqiang* in Chinese folk music so as to reach the effect of expressing rich emotions through singing. *Runqiang* is a series of unique skills formed in the course of the development of Chinese folk music to beautify, decorate and refine singing styles.³ The predecessor Zhangbo Dong has once pointed out "Both music scripts of *JiuGongDaCheng* and *NaShuYing* marked the first and third beats in a four-beat line, leaving the second and fourth beats unmarked". Huaiting Ye has also said "The minor beats are marked for beginners. The experienced singers can detect them all by themselves. On the contrary, it constrains the professionals if all the beats are marked in detail."

The tunes of Chinese music (mainly Han music) is often changed, decorated and developed according to different lyrics, music types, singers, time and places so

as to reach the effect of richness of music, which is what is called "The framework of a piece of music is the tunes while the highlight is in singing"⁴ It sets emotions as its center and relies on various ways of *Runqiang* to refine and supplement the inadequateness of tunes to express emotions; it also mediates between pronunciation and tunes and describes the characteristics and images in the music. Though it does not exist independently, it is an indispensable part and functions coordinately with tunes.

1. THE ORIGINALITY OF THE FORMATION OF *RUNQIANG*

To explore the originality of the formation of *Runqiang*, we found that the application of *Runqiang* as a music style in Chinese music can not be separated from the traditional music system which is based on *yinchang* (a unique way of singing). *Yinchang* refers to a particular way of singing characterized by a certain kind of flexibility of melody; the tune is relatively fixed rather than invariable. That is to say, in most cases, people pick out different lyrics in accordance to the dominant tunes and play out different music styles according to different time, places, melodies and audiences.

Since the traditional Chinese singing was in the form of *yinchang*, the tunes and pitches tend to vary greatly. For example, many old Chinese music scripts, including the popular *gongchi* music scripts in modern

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² China Encyclopedia Chief Editor Committee, Music and Dance Editor Committee, Editing Department China Encyclopedia Press. *China Encyclopedia Music and Dance* [M]. Beijing: China Encyclopedia Press 1989.

³ China Encyclopedia Chief Editor Committee, Music and Dance Editor Committee, Editing Department China Encyclopedia Press, China Encyclopedia Music and Dance [M]. Beijing: China Encyclopedia Press 1989.

⁴ Fu Xihua, *Essays of Classical Dramas and Acoustics*[M] Beijing: Renmin Music Press, 1957.

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times, had a universal characteristic, that is, there was often only a basic framework of music tunes, representing the dominant tones without specific description of details of the musical piece. It follows that strict voice control and script control are not suitable for Chinese music. They would confine a good singer to explore fully the details hidden in the music script, by which to transfer a “dead tune” into a “living tune” and a “dead voice” into a “living voice”, which is a general rule of Chinese traditional music.

Runqiang is a unique phenomenon in Chinese music. It originates from the *yinchang* system, whose originality was related to the long practice of Chinese singing and affected by language rules, singing habits, esthetic requirement and tune types, especially the tune system of Chinese language. Chinese language is a branch of *Han-zang* language family. The phonetic system of Chinese language is generally made up of consonants, vowels and tones, with each syllable having a fixed tune which performs a semantic function.

The tunes in Chinese language vary within individual syllables, that is, the individual characters are distinguished by the phonological positions and variant pitches of voice. The application and extension of this tune variation in the dynamic music is the basic originality of the formation of *runqiang*. Therefore, in Chinese singing, the pronunciation changes in accordance with the pitch of tunes in different forms of music. As a result, the tunes of the character and the tones formed in *runqiang* are in a one-to-one relationship. In other words, the consonant of a character is similar to the head-part of *runqiang* and the vowels similar to the belly-part. Vowels in characters normally sound resonant and last a longer time; correspondingly, the belly-part plays the most important role in the process of *runqiang*. The ending of characters corresponds with the ending part in *runqiang*.

Due to the special position that tunes hold in Chinese language, that is, the determining role which tunes of lyrics play in influencing the orientation of voice pitches of the melody, the tunes in music are required to be in accordance with the content of the music. Only in this way can the completeness and unity of the character and pronunciation be formed. As a result, when specific melodies are combined with tunes, the pronunciations are inevitably influenced by the lexical semantics and the content of music to form different styles. It is the tune of individual character that highlights the variance of styles. And this explains the way *yinchang* takes in order to coordinate the music tune and the pronunciation tune.

What should be pointed out is that the music in the West and the East are built upon two different music systems, that is, the two has different conceptions of music in each system. The eastern system takes the form of *yingchang* as its basis for variance of tune while the western system takes aria as the corresponding form for

tune variance. Seen from the phenomenon point of view, *runqiang* based on *yinchang* is a characteristic of music with simple scale while the western way based on aria is the characteristic of complex scales. Based on this point, the East and West have differences in experiencing music styles. *Yinchang* is a basic rule and skill in Chinese music, which is essentially different from the western aria. The tune in aria is relatively fixed and singers can only adjust in aspects of singing speed, singing strength, singing tones, etc. So applying the western aria style into eastern music will result in the lost of folk style.

It can be seen that most music of our country develops from *yinchang*. And the formation of *yinchang* is a product of several reasons, among which the tunes of Chinese language play an important role. The characteristic of *yinchang* is that it can be applied flexibly based on the basic tunes of the music, allowing the singers a broad space for creation. For this reason, *runqiang* can be applied in china. This is the basic reason for the formation of *runqiang*. We can draw the conclusion that “*Yinchang* is a unique way of singing in Chinese music and that the application of the ways of *yinchang* is the essentiality to master the Chinese music style; and the existence of *yinchang* must result in the production of *runqiang*, which is a basic rule of traditional Chinese music.”

2. THE STRUCTURE OF RUNQIANG

Runqiang in folk tunes mainly consists of the structure of morphology and of *chuangqiang*. Morphology structure mainly refers to the structure relation formed on the basis of Chinese syllables during the process of *runqiang*; *chuangqiang* structure refers to the structure of tunes formed in the content of music. These two have a common basis as well as different aspects in forming the structure of *runqiang*.

2.1 The morphology of *runqiang*

The form and structure of *runqiang* is based on its variation in pitch, tone and strength, which is represented by its variant scale characteristics during the unique process.

1st. Pitch: the change of pitch in *runqiang* is always sliding from one point to another. Its form is more like a line or continuum rather than a combination of moving notes. In the structure, all the notes comprise an organic organization which can not be divided and which is applied as a whole.

2nd. tone: the variance of tones within *runqiang* is extremely rich. For instance, the special music effect resulted from the application of skills like sliding, chattering and false voice etc. forms the main reason to

cause the tone variance within *runqiang*.

3rd. strength: *Runqiang* puts great emphasis on the contrast of strong and weak expressions within itself, for instance, the strength relation of soft and hard, light and heavy. In the process of *runqiang*, the strength of a particular note is completed by different force points. And the softness and hardness or lightness and heaviness also changes according to the change of music content.

The change of pitch, tone and strength within *runqiang* is a very complex process, among which each change of the internal elements also results in the change and development of other elements. For instance, the time aspect of *runqiang* is not only a lasting process for voice pitch, it also includes the distribution of tone and strength. Therefore, *runqiang* is an undividable organism.

The morphological structure of *runqiang* mainly consists of elements from two aspects, that is, the basic pitch of *runqiang* which is consistent and the changing pitch. The morphology of *runqiang* focuses mainly on tunes, that is, it distinguishes between the major and minor structures as well as the explicit and the implicit structures. In *runqiang*, if we regard those high-pitch notes as basic notes, that is, as the form of script and major notes, then those nil notes are regarded as changing pitches, that is, variant decorating forms. The relationship of the two in *runqiang* is that the changing pitch performs the function of structurally coordinating the basic pitch. For instance, it employs voice sliding, voice chattering, and false voice etc. to assist the structure of the basic pitch to be in the right position. When the changing pitch and the basic pitch are organically combined together, in other words, the deviation of the changing pitch from the basic pitch is in accordance with the requirement of the tune style of the music piece, we will feel that the music piece is full of style and spirit. When the changing pitch deviates too far away from the basic pitch, the piece of music will lose its certain style. So the morphology of *runqiang* is a changeable organic organization. Its form and structure always follows the principle of the uncertainty of the music tone. Therefore, different singers can perform out different music styles according to different lyrics, melodies, rhythms, and tone strength etc. Even the styles of the same singer will differ from time to time. This is determined by the characteristic of the morphology of *runqiang*.

2.2 The structure of *chuangqiang* in *runqiang*

Even though in the folk music, the music tunes are in a certain corresponding relationship with the syllable tunes of Chinese, this kind of corresponding relationship between character and music tone is a certain morphological structure of the music tone, in other words, it exists as the conditions for the formation

of *runqiang*, rather than as the music relationship resultant of the music content. Viewing from a large amount of folk music, whether it be folk songs, folk dramas or other folk music, we found that although people paid great attention to the corresponding relationship between the individual character and the music tone, they did not purely set the tone of the individual character as the standard for *runqiang* in the real performance, or sang in a character by character way. Rather, they set the structure of *runqiang* and its distribution arrangement according to the inner relationship between the content expressed by words and phrases of the music. That is to say, they need to manage the pronunciation and tunes of each character as well as the music tune so as to reach the effect of "standard pronunciation and appropriate voice position"; and they also need to pay attention to the distribution and arrangement of individual characters and tones in the line. Only in this way can the form and content of *runqiang* be represented and realized. All in all, to put the morphological characteristics of character and music tone into the appropriate position in the structure expressed by music content is the basic condition for *chuangqiang*.

Chuangqiang refers to the variant change and development based on the basic music tune, that is, "The framework of a piece of music is the music tune while the highlight is in singing". Folk music displays various forms to change and develop the melodies. It often varies according to different music types, music tunes, time and places and singers. From the point of view of *chuangqiang*, tune group is the basic unit for music expression, which often consists of one or more lines, which in turn is comprised of several different smaller units, whether it be a one-line structure music piece or a several-line structure music piece. The question is what is the main element that influences the change and development of the tone and rhythm in the basic tune group?

The change and development of the tones in folk music is influenced by the tunes of individual characters while the change and development of rhythms is mainly due to the music clauses. We know that lyrics, as a form of rhymed essay, pay great attention to the symmetric relationship between words in representing its inner structure regularities. On the other hand, in Chinese language, a one-syllable morpheme can exist independently as its own right as well as an element of a combination with other morphemes. In addition, these morphemes can be used repeatedly, for instance, the use of two consonants, vowels doubling etc. In the expression of words and phrases, the original tunes of the words may change due to the existence of certain empty words. In Chinese poems, due to certain unique characteristic of word-formation, the structures of the lines in poems display certain unique characteristics. For instance, in a five-beat poem, the two-two-one structure consists of three syllables and in a seven-beat poem, the two-two-three structure is comprised of three

syllables. Whatever syllable structure, as long as the content expressed is relatively complete, the line can be divided by “commas”, which is the main reason causing the rhythm changing of Chinese poems. For example, in the Zhangjiang folk song *QingSiNiao*, the rhythm in each line is different and showing no regularity, but the whole structure displays a characteristic, that is, each line begins in a condensed way and ends in a relatively loose way. This is caused by the difference of clause pauses of each line, which results in the changing of rhythms. Thus in folk music, clause is not only a standard by which we set the rhythms of the line, it is also the main standard on which the inner structure of *chuangqiang* relies. The music clause is a core organization, which corresponded with groups of syllables. The lines and groups of lines in music pieces all rely on music clauses to complete their change and development of their inner structures.

Generally speaking, music clause is the material basis for emotion expression in a line. The pitch, rhythm, tone and strength are all designed and applied according to the characteristic of music clauses. For example, the same character, the same word, may display different tone features in different clauses. To take one passage from the traditional folk drama *Picking Woods* as an example, when it is sung in *Qingqiang*, *Yuqiang*, *Jingyu*, *Heibeibangzi* etc. forms, great differences can be found in character image building and the handling with music tunes. Such differences are caused by the different division of music clauses in each form. When *Qingqiang* handles with the first line “chu men lai xiu xiu ba tou di” (coming out of the gate with her head down due to her shyness), it groups the first three characters into a clause, and adds an empty character “an” (Chinese pinyin) after the quick passing of the first two characters to form a long clause before pausing so as to express the *Qiulian*'s (the main female character) depression at home. Although such a clause lasts a long time, its internal connection with the whole line can still be felt.

In music, we can say that group of lines is the

minimal complete unit which has the ability to express the images and sentiment in the music. And music clause is an independent constituent in this unit, which has certain unique characteristics of its own as well as characteristics of the music spirit. In other words, they are organic constituents of the minimal complete unit. In the process of *chuangqiang*, people put these organic constituents into application according to different opinions and in different ways. Based on the traditional belief of “setting styles according to characters” and “correct pronunciation and mellowing voice”, folk music makes use of various ways like “rhythm change, repetition, question-and-answer, extension, cohesion, and removal” etc. to unify those independent units into a corresponding structure. All in all, in terms of the structure of *chuangqiang*, it is in fact a question of how to apply appropriately the change and development of music clauses in lines.

In conclusion, we can see that the structure of *Runqiang* in folk music is comprised of the structure of morphology and that of *chuangqiang*. In terms of morphology structure, *Runqiang* is a form of structure consisting mainly of consistent pitches assisted by changing pitches, which is based on Chinese syllables. In terms of *Chuangqiang* structure, *Runqiang* is based in the tones of characters, and takes into account the arrangement and distribution of each tone when they are combined to form groups of syllables which have certain semantic significance. Thus we can say that *Runqiang* is a complex and self-contained music phenomenon. With or without *Runqiang* not only represents the music differences in morphology and singing way, it is also a main reason that causes the different music styles. Due to the existence of *Runqiang*, Chinese folk music exhibits its unique and strong folk features both in morphology and style. Therefore, it is of great significance to further understand and inherit this music tradition, to know and master its various internal rules so as to make contributions in the Chinese folk music area as well as in the folk music teaching area.

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